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When the Nazi's Are Misunderstood: Addressing Racist Rhetoric in the Composition Classroom

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When the Nazis Are Misunderstood:

Addressing Racist Rhetoric in the Composition Classroom



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Many national news outlets have covered stories of blatant racism on college campuses, starting with events at the University of Missouri. I don't have to be at Mizzou to understand their struggle and desire for safe space because I know what it's like to be a Black student on a predominantly White college campus. I've been in predominantly White schools since the third grade and racism isn't just this "thing" happening "over there." It's here at the University of Kansas (KU). Most of my life, I've been seeking ways to confront racism as a student, but now I've also had to consider it as a teacher. In the past few weeks, I've had a lot of time to think about freedom of speech. Not only because of recent events at Mizzou, KU, and other campuses, but particularly thinking about how freedom of speech functions in the classroom. In my classroom.

A few weeks ago, one of my students shared his desire to own a Nazi uniform. This was in response to a journal prompt that asked the students to identify two to three items they would like to own. For an in-class activity, I put them in groups, assigned an audience to

each group, asked them to choose one item, and then instructed them to write a note integrating rhetorical appeals to persuade their audience to purchase their selected item.

Most students asked for a puppy, a range rover, a house. Big, but innocent things. So when the last student asked for a Nazi uniform, it was concerning to me even though it was a hypothetical request. Here is where many would say he has the right to freedom of speech, therefore, he can say whatever he wants in my classroom, and I should respect his interests and opinions.

Yes, he may have freedom of speech but he is not free from the consequences of his speech. None of us are. Everything we express has a positive or negative effect and I would be remiss to allow my students to speak freely without follow up.

You see, immediately following class, a student expressed her frustration and distress regarding his shared item. She felt extremely uncomfortable, and I

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did too. As a teacher of color, it was difficult for me to not see his attraction to racist material as a comment on my identity and authority. But I could not rest in my discomfort long as I had to consider ways of consoling the student who made her discomfort clear, while also considering other students that may have been uncomfortable, bearing in mind my Jewish student.

During the next class session, I readdressed the incident with the class. Too often our students don't see us publicly acknowledge their hurt and discomfort and I found it important to openly show my support. We discussed our shared role in creating a safe environment and reflected on our responsibility in regards to free speech, concluding that even when we intend well, we have to be attentive to the effect of our words.

I also spoke with the student to further gain his perspective and to discuss the discomfort brought to the classroom. He shared that he is interested in "alternate history" and that although the "SS uniform is a symbol of evil" he believed "the Nazis are misunderstood," and overall he didn't mean to offend anyone. Although he did not intend to make anyone feel uncomfortable, I could not dismiss the effect of his words.

His comments were deeply troubling to me, but I used his phrasing to help him see the problem with sharing this "symbol of evil." He agreed and recognized how his expression made other students (and me) uncomfortable. I encouraged him to always consider his audience as he continues to contribute in class. I honestly did not think he would accept responsibility but it was a huge learning moment that he did.

If I had ignored this encounter, as I was advised to, I would have failed to do two things: 1) help a student understand the powerful effects of his words and

interests (and also gain his perspective), and 2) most importantly, address the hurt and discomfort of other students. Both are scary for me to consider, since my priority, as a teacher, is to create a classroom that is as safe and comfortable as possible. Yes, I remind my students that sometimes we have to be uncomfortable to grow and learn, but for the most part my students should feel comfortable to attend and speak in class. This classroom encounter has helped me think through current conversations surrounding racial injustice on college campuses.

As of late, it's common to hear dismissive rhetoric claiming that people "are too sensitive" or "enjoy making others feel bad for their own problems" or "just need to move on." Such comments are violent, silencing tactics. Yet this is precisely the rhetoric that has been commonly spewed in response to claims of racism on campus. To think specifically about this rhetoric as applied to my scenario, could you imagine me telling my Jewish (and other non-White) students to simply "move on?" Of course not – that would be a crass response for me to give.

I imagine that we don't use such dismissive rhetoric when our family and friends express that we have harmed them or made them uncomfortable – at least I hope we don't. No, we listen to them, find ways to respond differently, and change our actions, even if we didn't intend to hurt. This approach can and should be applied to our students and colleagues. This is where we can start, shifting the ways we respond. For you are... we are always responsible for the things we put into this world. I've only been teaching for 15 months now and the best/worst part of the job is the unpredictability but it's still the greatest thing I've ever had the pleasure of doing.



Image by Vishad Patel